

Wednesday, May 5, 2010

Council approves 'Science City'

Residents remain wary after unanimous vote

by Margie Hyslop | Staff writer

The County Council has opened the door to building a "Science City."

By a unanimous vote Tuesday, the council approved a master plan for the Great Seneca Science Corridor, formerly called Gaithersburg West, covering 4,360 acres between Gaithersburg and Rockville west of Interstate 270.

During the last three weeks, the council scaled back the plan for a bioscience hub to 17.5 million square feet of commercial and research space from the original proposal of 20 million square feet.

The development would transform the 6.9 million-square-foot Shady Grove Life Sciences Center and also include housing and shops.

The area already includes the Universities at Shady Grove and a campus of Johns Hopkins University, as well as biotech businesses. As part of the plan, Hopkins intends to expand development to the 107-acre Belward Farm which the university purchased in 1989 under an agreement that development be limited to agricultural, academic, medical care and research or related uses.

Faced with concerns that development could become just another office park, the council also increased the percentage of life sciences-related construction required in the zone to 40 percent for plans larger than 5 acres — a one-third increase from the 30 percent initially proposed.

The council set staging requirements for development, to avoid allowing more traffic congestion than in similar zones, and agreed to require that half of the proposed Corridor Cities Transitway, a 14.1-mile mass transit line that would connect Shady Grove and Clarksburg, be completed before the second half of the plan can be built.

The Gaithersburg mayor and city council expressed their support of the plan and their gratitude to the county council for modifying it, in a statement Tuesday. In March, both Gaithersburg and Rockville officials had requested a number of revisions — including the name change.

The changes won the vote of Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large), the lone opponent of the plan in a straw vote before the council raised the requirement for life sciences-related development last month, but they did not allay the fears Elrich shares with groups concerned that their neighborhood streets will become gridlocked.

"I've never seen such a disconnect between communities and a master plan," said Elrich, who lives in Takoma Park.

Montgomery County Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park disagreed, calling the decision "a great statement of our commitment to our future."

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said traffic will increase anyway and the plan will provide more jobs and opportunities for people to live closer to those jobs.

Elrich said the 40,000 jobs projected to be added to 20,000 already in the area would not come anytime soon.

Commercial vacancy rates are high in Gaithersburg, and the county is trying build another life sciences center at White Oak and add jobs at White Flint, said Diana Conway, a board member of the West Montgomery County Citizens Association, a large civic group whose membership covers many affected communities.

"At some point they need to stop the fantasizing," Conway said.